

Title: The Manuscript Option Dissertation: Multiple Perspectives

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In the dissertation process, the doctoral candidate designs, conducts, and presents scholarly research that is intended to generate new knowledge. The traditional dissertation generally consists of several chapters, including an introduction, review of literature, methods, results, and discussion. But far more dissertations remain unpublished than published. This practice does a disservice to all who participated directly or indirectly in the research including the graduate, dissertation committee and advisor, individuals or organizations and the funding agency.

An alternate format, the manuscript option dissertation, is becoming more popular at universities throughout the United States and consists of a series of manuscripts that are either published or ready for journal submission. The University of Kentucky College of Nursing adopted the manuscript option for the dissertation in 2002, leaving the decision regarding that option versus a traditional dissertation open to the student and advisor. This paper describes our experience with the manuscript option dissertation from the perspectives of the program director, the advisor, the doctoral candidate, and the journal editor.

Program Director's Perspective

Our faculty recognized the many benefits of the manuscript option and was eager to implement it. Students embraced the option immediately. Our first two graduates who chose this option completed dissertations in May 2004. Their advisors and doctoral committees were extremely pleased with the products. Both graduates have submitted their dissertation manuscripts for publication, and several publications are in press. Currently, the majority of our students plan to write the dissertation in manuscript format.

The faculty set minimal guidelines and left much of the decision making about the manuscript option to the individual student's doctoral advisory committee. A minimum of three

manuscripts, at least one of which must present original research findings, plus an introduction and a conclusion, are required. To meet graduate school requirements, the manuscript option dissertation must meet the same formatting guidelines as a traditional dissertation (e.g., abstract, table of contents, list of tables and figures, margin requirements, etc.).

From the program director's perspective, the manuscript option is clearly a winning proposition. With this option, students can begin the process of manuscript development during course work. For example, a critical review of research on a topic conducted in one course may provide the basis for a manuscript that serves as the review of literature chapter. A pilot study conducted in our qualitative methods course may be expanded to form one study and manuscript for the dissertation. A psychometric pilot study for the measurement course may be extended to form yet another study and manuscript. Thus, students may begin to submit manuscripts for publication during course work, and those same manuscripts may form parts of the dissertation.

The manuscript option may motivate candidates to move toward the dissertation at a more rapid pace and ultimately may reduce the number of ABDs. While this has not been a particular problem for our candidates, the manuscript option may reduce the time needed to complete the dissertation. Publication by students also provides opportunities to recognize the accomplishments of students throughout the college, which can have a ripple effect in interesting master's and even undergraduate students in participating in research and seeking information about advanced degrees.

Publication by students is a mark of program success. Our graduate school requires a yearly report of student publications, presentations, grants, honors, and awards from each college. This information is used in a variety of ways, including strategic planning and determination of fellowship and tuition scholarship awards to the colleges for disbursement to

students. Student publication records also may be used in seeking internal and external funding, as they provide evidence of students' accomplishments and productivity. Thus, there is tremendous monetary incentive for colleges to support their students in publishing.

From the director's perspective, publication of the dissertation by one's graduates is important. The manuscript option is extremely valuable in meeting this objective. According to the American Association of Colleges of Nursing's (2001) *Indicators of Quality in Research-focused Doctoral Programs in Nursing*, students are expected to "establish a pattern of productive scholarship, collaborating with researchers in nursing and other disciplines in scientific endeavors that result in the presentation and publication of scholarly work that continues after graduation." Nurturing students in the publication process while at the same time supporting their progress with the dissertation helps achieve this indicator.

Publication of students' and graduates' dissertation research furthers recognition of the college and facilitates student and faculty recruitment by enhancing the credibility of the program. When prospective faculty and students have tangible evidence that students and graduates are publishing in peer-reviewed journals, the program gains recognition and a reputation for research and scholarly productivity, both of which are attractive to prospective recruits. These publications also can facilitate the recognition of a college for research expertise in specific focus areas.

Finally, publication enhances graduates' job placements, which also furthers the program's reputation. Graduates with a publication track record will be more favorably received in the job market. In addition, publications from the dissertation are essential for receiving future grant funding, especially from extramural sources.

Advisor's Perspective

The role of doctoral student advisor is to prepare students to assume responsibility for the advancement of scientific knowledge. Dissemination of state-of-the-art literature reviews, methodological reviews, theoretical papers, concept analyses, and research results is a major avenue by which scientific knowledge is made public. As has often been stated, "research is not done until it is published." The manuscript option dissertation promotes dissemination of multiple aspects of the candidate's dissertation.

For the dissertation advisor, a number of benefits make the manuscript option dissertation an attractive alternative to the traditional dissertation. The most obvious and immediate advantage is that several papers are already published or ready for submission when the candidate defends the dissertation. Many students see the end of the dissertation process as a time to rest from the rigors of doctoral education (and rightfully so). This period is usually quickly followed by entry into a new position that consumes more time than ever imagined. The process of carving up a voluminous traditional dissertation into publishable pieces can seem so daunting that publications never materialize and dissertation research goes unreported. If a graduate attempts to publish a traditional dissertation, considerable time will be spent dividing up the pieces for publication. The requirements of multiple roles will compete for writing time and the end result can be major delays in publishing such that the findings and other content can become outdated (Morris & Tipples, 1998). The manuscript option makes manuscript preparation substantially easier and more rewarding.

One of the most difficult tasks for a dissertation advisor is determining the best way to help a candidate who struggles with the thought of writing a traditional dissertation. The manuscript option dissertation may be a solution because it contains discrete, easy-to-manage sections. Although one might argue that traditional chapters could also be viewed as sections,

completion of a manuscript seems to have a psychological advantage that often makes the entire dissertation process seem surmountable.

The manuscript option enables advisors to mentor students throughout the program. Turning thoughts and findings into a publishable product is a fundamental skill that must be learned, ideally before graduation. Research manuscripts are often rejected because they read like a thesis (Johnson, 1996). Why not guide and support students while they are in doctoral study to publish their research rather than wait until they graduate and are no longer in routine contact with their mentors and supportive faculty? Access to and support from these individuals may be greater as a student than as a graduate (Morris & Tipples, 1998). Working with one's mentor and doctoral advisory committee provides a supportive and constructively critical environment for developing manuscript writing skills. As advisors guide students with little or no experience publishing, students acquire excellent writing skills, eliminating a major source of frustration for both faculty and students.

Another advantage of the manuscript option dissertation is that the candidate has a head start upon graduation with regard to feeling personally productive and demonstrating productivity to others. An early sense of accomplishment is an excellent way to enhance confidence and pave the way for future success. Graduates who have published are viewed more positively by potential employers and by grant reviewers. Early publication of the dissertation provides a foundation for presentations and research grant applications. In addition, some new investigator competitions or awards require a published manuscript, or one in publishable form, as part of the application. Participation in such initiatives rewards worthy candidates, promotes their visibility in a chosen field, and exposes recent graduates to the research community.

Probably the greatest benefit for the advisor is the opportunity to develop a lasting collaborative relationship with a future colleague. Working together with a candidate on manuscripts fosters a mutual respect and promotes long-term collaborative relationships. Publications usually bear the advisor's name as a co-author and stem from his or her research program or a related area. Thus, the advisor's productivity also is increased.

Doctoral Candidate's Perspective

The manuscript option dissertation is very appealing to doctoral candidates. After completing a traditional dissertation, graduates are often unsure how to disseminate their findings. As a result, while most traditional dissertations make a valuable contribution to the literature, few are read.

Dissertation committee members are ideally positioned to mentor the doctoral candidate, who often has not previously published nursing research and feels overwhelmed by the process. First, committee members advise the doctoral candidate how to identify the purpose of each paper and choose the appropriate journals. Typically, committee members have published extensively in numerous journals and can compare and contrast journals for the candidate who may be surprised to learn about journals that he or she did not know existed. The candidate gains exposure to the style and format of several different journals when writing papers for them. Furthermore, the candidate may be more confident about writing for more prestigious journals knowing that committee members will help guide him to her to achieve a high level of writing. Second, committee members help the candidate interpret author guidelines and ensure that the submitted paper is accurate, complete, appropriate for the target audience, and written in a scholarly style. Third, committee members help the candidate comprehend and respond to comments from peer reviewers and editors. Often the new author is dejected when asked to

revise a paper and may never resubmit. Most committee members view their work as an investment in the candidate's success and will help the candidate amend the paper until it is accepted. Thus, the chances are increased that the candidate will ultimately publish in a refereed and indexed journal that is accessible to countless investigators and clinicians.

The manuscript option gets research into print more quickly so that translation into practice can occur faster. In nursing, there is a vital need for published research data that establish a scientific basis for practice, answer clinical questions, evaluate the efficacy of interventions, improve outcomes, and test theory. Yet nurses report a lack of awareness of existing research and unavailability of research reports as significant barriers to research utilization (Hutchinson & Johnston, 2004). Consequently, there is a gap between research findings and their use in clinical practice (Hutchinson & Johnston, 2004; Seymour, Kinn, & Sutherland, 2003). The manuscript option has the potential to partially narrow the research-practice gap.

Doctoral candidates usually are more satisfied with the dissertation process and their research if they perceive their work as relevant and interesting to investigators and clinicians. Candidates understand that the goal of nursing research is to advance nursing knowledge and improve patient outcomes. Accordingly, candidates are discouraged by thoughts that their research will largely be unnoticed. Conversely, it is most rewarding for doctoral candidates to know that their published research contributed to the body of nursing knowledge.

A dissertation consumes the candidate's time; nonetheless, the manuscript option promotes time efficiency. From the beginning, the manuscript option dissertation is comprised of papers that conform to journal requirements. The doctoral candidate can immediately disseminate research findings by avoiding the need to rewrite and reformat the dissertation into

an accepted publication style. In addition, consumers of research are likely to notice and use the research findings before the study is dated.

The manuscript option may motivate the candidate to finish the dissertation. Candidates commonly lose momentum as they attempt to complete a traditional dissertation. Too often the dissertation is never finished. In contrast, completion and submission of one manuscript energizes the candidate to write and submit another.

The journal peer review process can strengthen the quality of the manuscript option dissertation. Reviewers and editors generally provide positive comments, ask questions, recommend revisions, or suggest other ways to strengthen the paper. The astute candidate will consider this feedback in revising the paper and preparing for the dissertation defense.

Finally, the manuscript option may be advantageous as doctoral candidates build a program of research, seek academic or research positions, and apply for grants. Candidates with a reputation for publishing their research distinguish themselves from those who do not publish. Furthermore, candidates who publish their research enjoy increased credibility and visibility within the professional community. As a result, new doors of opportunity are opened.

Journal Editor's Perspective

Although the editor's role varies depending on the journal, a priority for all editors is to receive, edit, and publish quality papers that are of interest to their readers. As the number of scholarly journals explodes, many journal editors are faced with the problem of not receiving enough high-quality manuscripts. The manuscript option dissertation is a practical solution to this problem as more doctoral candidates and graduates will publish the products of their dissertation.

A major product of the manuscript option dissertation for the journal editor is higher-quality submissions of original research findings from newer scholars whose work was done under the direct supervision of an advisor and committee. Although this same process can occur with the traditional dissertation, usually the graduate has relocated to begin a new position and must now communicate with the advisor and committee remotely. Preparing a manuscript under these conditions is less efficient, less timely, and often more frustrating to the graduate, who may still require considerable mentorship to develop a manuscript.

An additional benefit to editors is that candidates who work directly with faculty on their first publications learn the steps necessary to properly prepare a manuscript for submission. Thus, the received manuscripts are less likely to need preliminary revisions before they can be sent out for peer review.

Journal editors become frustrated with authors who fail to respond to requests for revision. This often occurs with authors who have not had experience submitting and revising manuscripts for publication. If the entire publication process is done collaboratively with the advisor, manuscripts are more likely to be revised and resubmitted.

Finally, editors will benefit from the likelihood that students will be more productive writers in the future, productivity that will be directly channeled to scholarly and clinical journals. When students have positive publication experiences during doctoral studies, they are more likely to publish in the future.

Summary

Based on our experiences at the University of Kentucky, the manuscript option dissertation is clearly a win-win situation from every angle. Other doctoral programs may find

this approach invigorating. The ultimate benefit is the rapid dissemination of new knowledge to healthcare professionals for application to practice.

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